Printing Business History Is Outlined By Local Man

In the following article, Seale Johnson, (pictured above) Jackson printing company executive, describes the history of the printing business here:

The printing business in Jackson dates from its very beginning. The town was laid out and lots sold in August of 1822. The first newspaper, The Pioneer, with its "job shop," got started only three months later. In the very first issue was an oft repeated filler. "Blanks printed and for sale at this office".

The printing business in Jackson was underway.

One of the oldest printing companies still in operation in West Tennessee is the McCowat-Mercer Press, Inc., of Jackson. The company was founded early in 1873 as the Thomas R. McCowat Co. by Phillip and Thomas R. McCowat. The City of Directory of 1875 shows the company as having been "well established for several years".

Printing was not a new venture with Phillip McCowat, at least. The oldest known issue of the West Tennessee Whig — to which the Jackson Sun traces its beginning — shows him as associate editor and junior partner. The paper is dated Nov. 4, 1842 and is the fifth copy of the paper to be issued. This rare paper contains a statement from the owners under date of October 7, 1842 and is repeated obviously from the first issue; it states "We are strangers here and have nothing to rely on but our own unwearied exertions to deserve it." Messrs Gates and McCowat did not fail to rely on job printing to help the fortunes of the paper along.

In 1845 the company no longer had Philip McCowat in the firm but was known as Gates and Parker. In 1845 they printed what is thought to be the first full length hard bound book ever printed in Jackson. A local collector owns a copy and it is entitled "Moral Precepts and Guide to Youth" by preacher and Saint of the Wilderness, Obadiah Dodson. A year later another of his books was printed by the firm and is known as Sermons by the Wanderer. There is only one known copy of this book, but it shows the fine work done by the pioneer printers.

The next chapter in the story is shown in the Collector's of the West Tennessee Whig, issue of Friday, June 5, 1846. It announces the dissolution of the firm by mutual consent. Mr. Hale is leaving for the Mexican War and the firm will be operated by W. W. Gates and Co. It did not state that Mr. Parker was leaving the firm. This issue is full of news of the Mexican War — but not too full to announce, "Blank Warrants, Executions, Delivery Bonds are for sale at this office".

Other examples of the firm job work are broadsides offering slaves, men, women and children for sale, land, horses, service of Jocks at low prices, and medicines to cure all ailments of the human family. Some examples of these broadsides are displayed on the walls at the McCowat-Mercer offices.

One font of these old bold type faces is still in existence and is brought out only to herald some rare event — maybe to cry out the opening-up of the New Jerusalem.

The name of the Thomas R. McCowat Co. was changed in 1903 to McCowat-Mercer Printing Co. Shortly thereafter Thomas McCowat, an old bachelor, died. Ed Mercer and his brothers, Charles and Garnet, ran the company for many years.

In the late thirties the print shop came under new management and soon the firm name was amended to McCowat-Mercer Press, Inc. The company started with only "foot fed" presses, in the nineties became "steam printers," and in 1898 the company signed its first contract with the International Typographical Union. It has been a happy relationship for nearly sixty years.

The company had its beginning as letterpress printers, printing from type and metal plates. Ten years ago it introduced an addiional process: offset or lithography. It has found wide acceptance, particularly on livestock auction catalogs and other work requiring many pictures.

Lately the form in addition to its commercial work has gained recognition for the books it has published dealing with Southern history and the Confederacy on particular. Among the titles issued are "Co. Aytch, Side Show of the Big Show" by Sam R. Watkins, said by many to be the greatest narraters of a common soldier of the Civil War; W. W. Heartsill's "1491 Days in the Confederate Army," now out of print; Monroe Cockrell's "Lost Account of the Battle of Corinth;" Robert S. Henry's "As They Saw Forrest," with its great store of unfamiliar tales of the war great cavalry leader; "Remin'scences of Big I" by W. N. Wood Rebel Shavetail with Lee's Army. Others are in process.

"Big I" made page one of the New York Times last Monday. This was the volume presented President Eisenhower by his pastor. Lt. Wood had fought over the fields where now lies the President's farm.

Two of the company's titles, including "Big I" were selected by the Civil War Book Club for national distribution to its members. It is said only one other American publisher can equal this number.

Jackson, always famous for good printers, has thus become a recognized center for book and magazine work. McCowat-Mercer has printed all volumes issued by the Memphis State College Press and the Friendly Press with its Elbert Russell Quaker, a splendid book.

Other publications include the Tennessee Law Review, the Royal Cross, national magazine of one of the great societies of the Protestant Episcopal Church, the papers of the West Tennessee Historical Society and the Annual Publications of the East Tennessee Historical Society. The company has now in process a distinguished history, "Lauderdale County from Earliest Times," edited by Kate Peters of Ripley. She has been ably assisted by Wm. Klutts, editor of the Lauderdale Enterprise. The volume will be issued by the Sugar Hill Library in 1957.

Some years ago the McCowat-Mercer printed Historic Madison, the story of Jackson and Madison County. This book was sponsored by the Madison County Historical Society and might well be called the brain child of the late Clarence Pigford. Mr. Pigford was the moving sprit in the project. The book was ably written by Emma Inman Williams of Jackson. The book now exceedingly rare and brings up to $15 for a good copy.

The nephew of founders, Thomas R. and Philip McCowat, continues to serve the company as expert typograher. He is well versed in Jackson's early days and resides with his wife in the historic McCowat home at 119 Cedar Street. He remembers Thomas McCowat as a bachelor who never married, as a man with a fine sense of humor and teller of stories about early